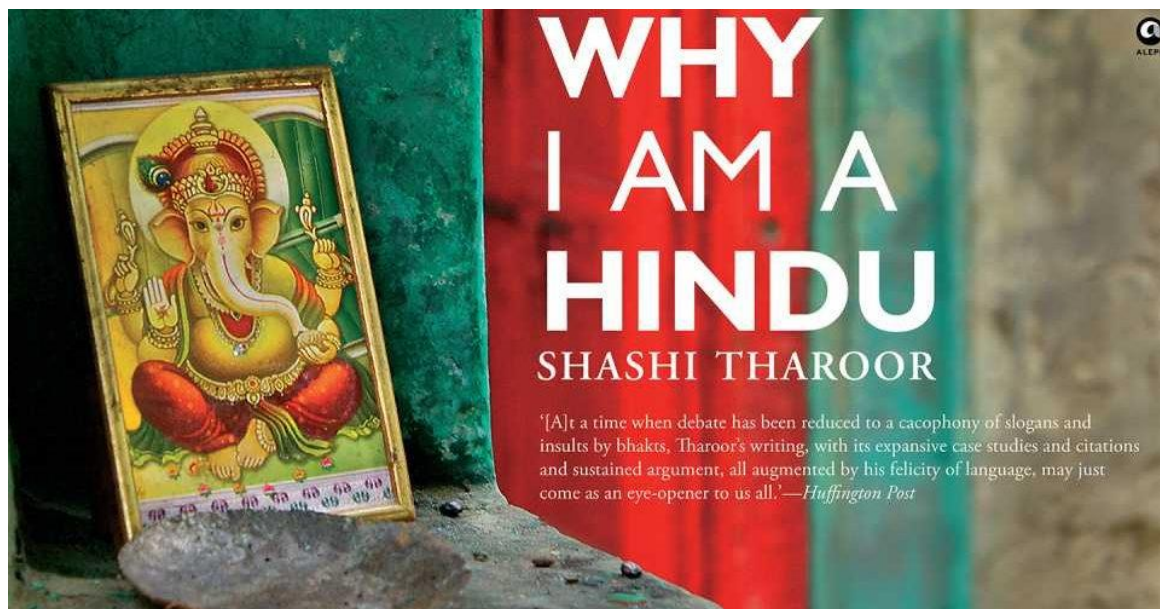


# Some Reflections on Reading Why I am a Hindu



## Shashi Tharoor's Cherry-Picking

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A more apt title for Tharoor's book would have been "Why I am a Protestant". It is immaterial that he points out the differences between Christianity and 'Hinduism'. The point is that he uses the Protestant framework nevertheless.

Human thinking is structured with layers upon layers of cognitive structures. Each word forms a structure that sets limits on a basic concept. On top of that, each concept-cluster that makes up our thoughts is structured, theory-laden, embedded in a specific framework. All of these structures are conceptual limitations that act as a filter between our experience and the perception of our experience. This is a human

predicament. The ancient Hindu sages figured a way out of this predicament and tried to communicate their discoveries in a variety of ways. What do we really see and what do we experience – is it a snake or is it a rope? By way of such analogies they tried to teach us how to break through cognitive barriers so that we can experience the Real, or *Sat*. To do this we need to pierce the veil of *maya*, the most fundamental of all cognitive barriers.

Fast forward three-thousand years and what we find is that Hindus have gone in the opposite direction altogether. We have added even more layers of *maya*. The most glaring example of this is how we have taken to describing our traditions through the framework of Protestant Christianity. It is actually a framework shared by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, with slightly different elements in each, but its most

dominant mode of influence is Protestant so for the sake of convenience I will refer to this as the Protestant framework.

What exactly is this framework? It declares that there is a God who dwells in a spiritual domain in the heavens. This God created the world and made human beings in his image who dwell in the material earthly realm.

Everything that happens in the world is in accordance with God's will and happens for a reason. God has a plan and it is the purpose of human beings to figure out this plan so that they can align their will with God's will. To help human beings in this task, God revealed this Truth to them in the Bible. The Bible is the word of God and everything it contains is the Truth. Because human beings are essentially sinners, God sent Jesus to help them become free of their sins (attain salvation) so that they can go to heaven. The *only* way to attain salvation is

through Jesus Christ; all other gods are a form of the devil. Those who do not accept Jesus Christ are condemned to a life of eternal torture in hell. It is the obligation of Christianity to convert everyone to their religion so that their souls may be saved from the clutches of the devil.

When the Europeans came to India, they needed to discover the ‘religion’ of the natives to better govern them. Thus they went about feverishly looking for Hindu holy books, Hindu doctrine, Hindu gods, and Hindu prophets. Imagine if a scientist goes on a quest to find life on another planet. The only example of life that we have is that which we call ‘life’ here on earth. The scientist would be guided by *this* theoretical framework of life and would look for things from within *this* theoretical framework to determine whether or not there is life on that planet. Exactly the same

process occurred when the British started to look for the ‘religion’ of India. The only framework of religion that exists is that of the Judeo-Christian religions. By cherry-picking some of the elements present in Indian culture and weaving them into a pattern that fit more or less into their framework, they professed to have found the Hindu religion. But the pattern that they wove did not exist in India. If this pattern does not exist, it means that religion does not exist because it is this pattern that makes up religion. The only way to make this pattern appear is to accept Protestant theology as a legitimate frame of reference for the Indian traditions. This is precisely what we do nowadays.

Given this fact, a more apt title for Tharoor’s book would have been “*Why I am a Protestant*”. It is immaterial that he points out the differences between Christianity and

‘Hinduism’. The point is that he uses the Protestant framework nevertheless. On this picture, discrete Indian systems of knowledge and their associated practices become transformed into a pattern that is religion; they are no longer discoveries based on evidence and experience; they are no longer systems of ethics or avenues to find happiness; they are now a religion, a belief system – just another variant of Christianity.

The message that Tharoor essentially conveys is that being Hindu means that everybody is free to believe whatever they like. As evidence for this claim he invokes the *Nasadiya Sukta*. This *sukta* is a speculation on the origins of the world that ends on an agnostic note – we can never really be sure how the world began. There are so many interesting conclusions to draw from this *sukta*; nonetheless Tharoor settles



for the most trivial one situated squarely within the framework of Christian theology. Speculations about the origin of the world are fascinating and irresistible for inquiring minds. However, the bards seem to have concluded that, in the final analysis, this is not a particularly profound topic of inquiry. In Hindu lore, there have been several creations and destructions, and there will be many more. The fact that there are so many different creation stories in Indian folklore is evidence for the fact that creation was not taken seriously within the intellectual domain even if it featured in the folklore. In the Christian framework, on the contrary, creation is of crucial importance, not only because their God created the world, but because the biblical account of creation is the Truth. It is for this reason that the Church bitterly opposed, and even executed, scientists who posed a challenge to the

biblical account. But this is of no consequence in the Indian scheme of things since the Indian traditions did not obsess about the truth of their creation stories. Something that is of no consequence to Hindus cannot be used to validate any meaningful claim about them.

In matters that are of consequence, on the other hand, it is straight up nonsense to talk about “multiple versions of the truth” as Tharoor does. It is not the case that Buddha, Mahavira, Shankara, Guru Nanak, Kabir, or Ramakrishna each made different discoveries. They made the same discovery and had the same insights. They just described them in their own unique way, within the context of their times and the prevailing social conditions, based on their own aesthetic and personal leanings. From this you cannot leap to the conclusion that “anything goes” which is basically the gist

of Tharoor's entire account of 'Hinduism'. The very Shankara that Tharoor cites as seeing everyone as equal (another Protestant meme), did not mince words in saying what he really thought of some of his brethren who did not measure up to his ideals: *jada* (dull-witted); *mudha* (foolish); *anarya* (ignoble); *tamasic* (gross); *adharmic*; ... you get the drift. Not only that, protection of dharma is a recurrent theme in the *Itihasa* and *Puranas*. This does not suggest an "anything goes" attitude since this means the protection of a particular way of life.

Speaking of the epics, it is not the case that the Indian intellectual traditions were confined to some arcane domains like *Advaita* that only an elite few could comprehend while the common folk lived in darkness until some reformers came along and brought the Word to the masses, as Tharoor implies. There is an inexhaustible

reservoir of stories that embody the principles of *Advaita* and convey them in a form accessible to all. This was available in the furthest reaches of the land by means of a rich tradition of village-theater and story-telling traditions. These enabled reflection on subtle principles much in the same way the avenue of *Advaita* did for some. Most of the enlightened masters emerged from the villages and were often unlettered folk. In fact, it can be argued that it is on account of the epics and *Puranas* that the Indian traditions have been transmitted in a line of continuity through the centuries. This enabled them to retain their structure and yet remain free of dogma or normative thinking. The stories have truth value without proclaiming to be true.

The characteristic attitude of the Indian traditions is to recognize that each person needs different instruction that is appropriate

for them at a particular time. It has nothing to do with being tolerant or accepting or respectful of anyone else's practices. This is as irrelevant as it would be if a swimmer told a hiker, "I tolerate and respect the fact that you practice a different sport and you practice it on the mountains and not in a swimming pool". It makes no sense to talk in terms of tolerance and respect for others' views in this context. It is superfluous and cannot be used to say anything intrinsically meaningful except to make the trivial point that not everything is exactly like Christianity.

The Indian traditions developed breakthroughs in *human* psychology and as such this knowledge is applicable to all human beings regardless of cultural or social or religious differences. It is a travesty to lump it together with religion. Religions are fully dependent on a belief system that must

be taken on faith. As S.N. Balagangadhara notes, if you take away the Bible and you take away Jesus, there will be nothing left that would be recognizable as a religion called Christianity. Similarly, if you take away the Quran and take away Mohammad, there will be nothing left that would be recognizable as a religion called Islam. Religions stand or fall based upon these two factors. If these two factors are necessary components of religion, it obviously means that the Indian traditions are phenomena of a different kind. You cannot use different standards of determination in judging this matter. Even Buddhism does not need a Buddha, nor does Jainism need a Mahavira. The Indian traditions will still exist, each as a distinct entity and each distinguishable from the other without any such props. They are human discoveries that can be

communicated in any number of ways, not a belief system handed down from God.

Clinging for dear life to the coat-tails of Vivekananda, Tharoor mechanically repeats *ekam sat* as if that proves the point that all religions are the same. Cherry-picking as usual, he fails to include the full *ekam sat* verse from the *Rig Veda* which actually goes as follows: “They hail Him as Indra, as Mitra, as Varuna, as Agni, also as that divine and noble-winged Garutmān. It is of One Existence that the wise ones speak in diverse ways, whether as Agni, or as Yama, or as Mātarivān.” In other words, our interpretation of this verse must correspond to, and cohere with, the concept of *Sat* that the *rishis* are trying to explicate within the bounds of a particular framework. The Abrahamic God is conceptualized in a completely different way. Even a cursory

Wiki-peek would suffice to make this distinction clear.

We can make a plausible case that if Vivekananda said *ekam sat* with the intention of including the Protestant belief system in line with the Indian traditions, it goes to show that he did not know what he was talking about. He did not understand the nature of the Judeo-Christian religions nor what they mean by 'God'. This is a matter for debate and discussion rather than a piece of dogma that must be accepted just because Vivekananda said it. Legend has it that in the famous debates of the 8<sup>th</sup> century between Buddhists and Hindus, if stumped for an answer, the monks would rather self-immolate than concede a point! This is probably just a dramatized account, but the point is clear. Rigorous debate is an essential component of a healthy society. A namby-



pamby “anything goes”, “*ekam sat*” type of cop-out is no solution.

Why is it a cop-out? It’s because this attitude has allowed Protestant ideas to get institutionalized while masquerading as secular and neutral. Secularism itself is a Protestant idea based on the theological framework that sees the world as divided in two realms – the divine and the material. In western liberal theory the words ‘divine’ and ‘material’ have been replaced by the words ‘private sphere’ and ‘public sphere’. The conceptual structure, however, remains Protestant, albeit dressed up to sound neutral. But it can never be neutral because a large part of the world’s population does not divide the world into two separate realms the way these religions do. Neither does science divide the world into these two realms. This means that when we import these ideas into the Indian Constitution we

do it on the basis of Protestant theology. The objection is not that it is Protestant. The objection is that it does not make sense within the larger Indian context, nor does it make sense within a scientific context. The only context within which it makes sense is the Judeo-Christian one.

What is worse, secularism has lost even the minimal problem-solving capacity it had two centuries ago when it at least served the purpose of preventing Christians from constantly killing each other over theological differences. Now people who describe themselves as secular are basically those over whom religion does not have the tight grip it once had. Among the believers, secularism has not made a dent and is most often used as a powerful tool to promote and protect all kinds of whacky ideas and policies. Any intellectual worth their salt must examine the consequences of

importing theology and passing it off as ‘neutral’ and ‘secular’ and not just make a bald claim that secularism means something else in India. We would do well to figure out other ways to achieve social harmony than to rely upon cognitively impoverished ideas such as secularism and neutrality.

In fact, in India, it is this liberal policy of neutrality and tolerance that eventually gave rise to Hindu fundamentalism. British colonial policy, being ‘tolerant’ and ‘neutral’, permitted the natives to continue with their practices as long as they were sanctioned by the scriptures. In a land where textual authority had mattered little, it now assumed enormous importance. It began to distort the experience of the Hindus. Where common sense and human wisdom had determined the course of action, the authority of dogma and doctrine now took its place. This attitude continued to harden

and our traditions began to increasingly take on a Protestant flavor, complete with a denunciation of ritual, smashing of idols, insisting that God is only one, or that our epics are the Truth. Hindus too began to speak in terms of dogma and came up with a standardized set of responses that were altogether too pat. Religious fundamentalism and liberal toleration and are two sides of the same coin; they are both anchored in theological principles. There's no use decrying one and embracing the other.

The problem is not that 'Hinduism' has been hijacked by some rabble. The bigger problem is that India's intellectuals have failed her. While the British were busy studying us, we did not bother to study the British. Instead of trying to understand the theology and history of Christianity, to understand why 'Hinduism' is portrayed the

way it is, we have taken to describing our culture precisely in the terms set by the British. Tharoor notes that it is striking how Hinduism has come to resemble the more fanatical religions. Is this any surprise? If you characterize our traditions in the framework of the fanatical religions, naturally they will come to resemble them eventually. For all the anguish Tharoor expresses in the second half of the book, he offers no solutions. His general message seems to be: act like you're above it all, turn the other cheek, and get your ass whipped.

So, what can we do to solve these problems? The only thing I got out of Tharoor's book was to learn about Deen Dayal Upadhyaya. I confess to a near-total lack of knowledge about Indian politics and its players, so learning about him was a like breath of fresh air. The man was a dreamer; some of his ideas may sound far-fetched, even

unpalatable, but at least he dared to dream. He dared to free himself from the tentacles of colonial cognitive barriers and forge something different instead. We should debate his ideas in the domain where they truly belong – the social sciences – instead of treating them as religion.

The current crop of social sciences is one of the greatest failings of western civilization. Many of its fundamentals are based on theology so it is no wonder that they lack problem-solving capacity. Yet we teach these worthless social sciences in our schools and universities as if our own traditions do not provide better problem-solving alternatives. Many of the ideas from western liberal philosophy have gone way past the point of diminishing returns and are now almost pernicious. ‘Human rights’ is one such concept. It creates more divisiveness on account of identity politics

than any benefits it offers. How much better to focus on human obligations instead? If everyone lived up to their obligations, the question of rights would automatically dissolve. As Upadhyaya suggests, let us look at our obligations and focus on the rights of rivers, mountains, forests and animals instead.

Upadhyaya hones in on the concept of *purush-artha* as being a far more useful framework in the Indian context. It is grounded in human well-being and is applicable to all humanity. All human beings want to be healthy, prosperous, and happy. It is regressive to regard certain avenues of exploration as taboo just because the principles are deemed to be a part of Hindu religion. This is a double-whammy for Hindus. We are required to recognize Protestant ideas as secular and we are required to treat Hindu empirical discoveries

and theoretical claims as religious. It is here that Tharoor's religious fundamentalism is most vividly apparent. He is unwilling to, or incapable of, looking at ideas on their merits. Instead he casts them in a religious mold that goes hand-in-hand with professing 'tolerance', 'neutrality', 'plurality' and other claptrap at the cost of producing knowledge.

S.N. Balagangadhara is another thinker whose ideas are eminently suitable for resolving the crisis we find ourselves in. His book *Reconceptualizing India Studies* gets to the heart of the problem we face. His theses explain the relation between cultural psychology and political theory and the institutional structures that result from these. He rightly suggests that the first step in extricating ourselves from our Protestant fetters is to begin with a study of western culture. It will then become clear that everything we say about ourselves is



actually a description of the western experience of our culture. We have adopted their way of speaking, thereby losing access to our own experience. Balagangadhara's broader vision is to de-colonize the social sciences so that they can be a meaningful source of knowledge instead of theologically-drenched creations of western civilization that more often than not make problems worse. It would be enormously beneficial to further his research efforts.

Or we could join in the efforts of Rajiv Malhotra, a karma yogi of the highest caliber, who has almost single-handedly built a movement to raise awareness about the pernicious effects of western scholarship on India. In fact, it was his article *Wendy's Child Syndrome* that I read back in 2002 that first opened my eyes and set me on an unwavering path of serious study. We would

do well to contribute to the momentum he has built and add to its dynamism.

There are many, many other intellectuals, in diverse fields of study, who are not given a platform because of the stranglehold of colonial ideas that are used in government. But the fact that these thinkers do exist gives us reason to be hopeful for the future.

Our problems will not go away by simply fixing the blame on criminals, bullies, and other hoodlums while acting like we are above it all. This is liberal narcissism of the worst kind. The blindness of our public intellectuals makes them equally complicit and they must be held to account. Let us re-examine all the received 'wisdom' that we treat as the gospel truth. Whether it comes from Vivekananda, Ambedkar or Gandhi; whether it's about democracy, secularism or human rights; whether it is psychology,

sociology or anthropology; whether it is enshrined in the Constitution or in the *shastras*. If it is useful in promoting human and social well-being, by all means let us embrace it. Otherwise, let's not hesitate to fling it on the rubbish heap and consign it to the flames. Only in this manner can we hope to revitalize our traditions so that they flourish and spread on their own merit without the need to resort to violence to enforce them. For this we need proper reflection on our own experience. We need to break free of the cognitive barriers, the veils of *maya* that get in the way of doing this.